

Copy

## HISTORY OF CHRIST CHURCH

Old Christ Church is one of a number of churches originally established in the late sixteen hundreds and early seventeen hundreds by the Church of England. The conditions were anything but favorable for the Church. Missionaries were in very short supply and the temper of the local population was not oriented toward what is normally considered "Christian Life." One Anglican missionary laboring in the area wrote the following to the Archbishop of Canterbury concerning the community life at the time:

"... also the Lord's Day is prophaned religion despised, & all notorious vices committed as that it has become a Sodom of uncleanness and a pest house of iniquity."

Life was not easy nor gracious for the settlers and to escape the harshness of isolation, disease, and the climate, hard drinking and gambling became the chief forms of entertainment. The Church of England, under the prodding of the missionaries, in the area began to intensify its missionary efforts and on 16 May 1692 drew up the first articles establishing the Church of England in the province of Maryland. Among the established parishes was Piscataway Parish. A Vestry was appointed and at the first meeting they agreed to purchase some seventh-eight acres of land at Broad Creek. A parish church was built and survives today as St. John's Church, Broad Creek, Oxon Hill.

Within a very few years of the establishment of Broad Creek, members living in the southern end of the parish found it inconvenient to travel to the Broad Creek Church and commenced steps to build a Chapel of Ease in the Accokeek Creek region. The first prayer meetings were apparently held sometime in the year 1698 in private homes. The first formal church structure was built within a few years on the present site of Christ Church. The records give no accurate description of this initial building except to say it was of frame construction typical of the times. In 1743 this frame structure was torn down, rebuilt in brick and, with later alterations, serves as the current parish church.

It is of interest to note that Christ Church was originally built for the convenience of the local population and this was constructed on private land. It remained on private land until on 14 December, 1843, the family of William Lyles deeded the southern section of their farm, "Cherry Mount", on which the church stood, over to the Vestry "in consideration of the sum of seventy-five dollars".

The congregation recovered recognition as a "separate" congregation in 1823, and in 1869 separated from Broad Creed Parish to form St. John's Parish with parish boundaries starting in the north at Piscataway Creek and settling between the course of the Mattawoman Creek and the Potomac River.

In 1745, at the time of the building of the present brick structure, liturgical theology was quite different than it is today. The dictates of this theology permitted no music during Holy Services nor were stained glass or colored windows of any description allowed in the church.

The pews were of the typical colonial box type and the original pulpit was located on what is now the Gospel of north side of the Church between the second and third windows. The main entrance was at what is now the second window on the Epistle of south wall of the Church. The original floor was brick, and the walls were plastered as they are today.

Christ Church has seen many turbulent years. The conditions or environment in which it was started continued. When the revolutionary fever became strong in the 1770's the clergy found themselves in considerable conflict with their congregations. One clergyman wrote:

"..... and for more than six months I preached, and when I did preach, with a pair of loaded pistols lying on the cushion."

It was not until after the revolution that the churches in the colonies were formally separated from the Church of England and clergymen were no longer bound by conscience and administration to loyalty to the Throne of England.

As a unit of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States, Christ Church survived the presence of British troops during the War of 1812 and the occupation by the Union Army during the years of 1861-1865.

On Christmas Eve 1856 Christ Church burned. After the fire only the thick brick walls were left in tact. The congregation responded immediately and in 1857 the church was rebuilt and in use again. At the time of this rebuilding, however, radical alterations in design were established resulting in the present structure. The Tractarian or Oxford movement originating in England had greatly altered the theological atmosphere in this country. Consequently, liturgical theology had changed from the old puritan oriented expression to a more ornate expression of the Holy Service. The entrances were changed to the present location, the present chancel was added and stained glass windows were introduced at both the east and west ends of the building. Colonial box pews were ignored and the present pews, all facing east, were installed. A bell tower was also added and by this time music had become an intricate part of the liturgy. The only alterations since the reconstruction of 1857 have been the installation of a heating system and a new organ.

The bricks for the walls are reported to have been made locally if not on what are now the church grounds. Close inspection of these bricks will show that many are fused into glass on the ends, this being caused by being too close to the fire in the old white/<sup>oak</sup>fired kilns. The walls are solid brick, twenty-four inches thick and rest on the clay subsoil. There are no footings or foundations as are used in modern construction.

Christ Church is now undergoing another great change in its life. As the floor has deteriorated, a complete restoration of the church is scheduled in the near future. But this perhaps will not be the change that is being effected on the parish life by the change of the local community from rural to suburban or urban life. The history of the parish indicates how well it has weathered very hard and difficult times and we pray that this tempering will provide substance to meet the challenges of modern times.

- NO DATE OR AUTHOR GIVEN.
- LIKELY WRITTEN DURING THE REV. ROLAND JONES RECTORATE (1958-1967)
- THIS NOTE WRITTEN BY THE REV. FATHER BRIAN VANDER WEL, AUG. 2016